

last month. But it's best if that's what Frau Leib continues to believe.'

Fräulein Gelber hesitated again. 'I don't want you speaking too much to her, you understand?'

'I understand,' said Heidi.

chapter seven

Frau Leib

The rain pounded on the roof of the bus shelter like it couldn't wait to get down from the sky. One of the cows moaned softly, a sad, wet complaint about life in general.

'Go on,' urged Mark.

'The bus,' said Anna.

Mark looked at his watch.

'We've got another five minutes at least,' he said.

'Go on!'

Anna took another breath, and began the story again.

Frau Leib had grey hair, not speckled grey like Fräulein Gelber's — whose hair looked a bit like a hen's feathers, Heidi thought sometimes — but grey all over like a saucepan, and tight curls that looked

like they were made of metal too, they were so firm about her head.

Frau Leib's hands were large, with red knuckles. Her skirt was much longer and wider than Fräulein Gelber's, the sort of skirt you could use for carrying apples or cabbages from the cellar, and an apron from her neck to her knee, a 'Kittel', that seemed welded to her waist no matter what else she wore.

Heidi never saw Frau Leib without her apron; whether she was coming or going, she still had it on. It looked bigger than she was, all bunched up at her sides, as though at one time Frau Leib had been even larger than she was now.

Frau Leib lived on the farm just down the road, the one with the pigs in the black mud. Her husband worked the fields with their young grandsons and two of their daughters-in-law. Their sons were away fighting, except for one who was in a prisoner-of-war camp in America (America was the enemy now, too).

Herr Leib was in the Nazi Party — one of the first members in the whole district — so his wife was supposed to be trustworthy.

She also liked to talk.

Frau Leib talked in a dialect so thick it was sometimes hard to understand, but that didn't matter, because she said so much that you could

leave half of it out and still have enough for conversation.

'I talk as the pig's snout grows,' said Frau Leib with a grin that showed the dark gaps in her back teeth, meaning that she talked as thoughts flew into her head, and there were a lot of thoughts under Frau Leib's grey curls.

'What happened to your face, girl?' she demanded, as soon as she saw Heidi. 'A burn? Is that what it is? The bombs?'

'I was born with it,' said Heidi quietly.

Frau Leib's great arms came round her and she hugged her to her apron, which had just the faintest smell of pig. 'You poor darling,' she said. 'I will give you some ointment. It's pig lard, with chickweed and other herbs. It is my grandmother's recipe and she got it from her mother, so it is very good. It takes scars like that away so fast you'd think the boar was after them to get its fat back!'

'Thank you,' said Heidi, as she was released from the apron, though she knew the ointment wouldn't do any good. If there had been a way to remove the mark Duffi would have arranged it years before.

But there were some questions even Frau Leib knew not to ask. Whoever had organised the house

for them had made it clear that Fräulein Gelber — and Heidi — were people of importance. Their clothes, their food, their lack of ration cards, the guard, the provisions that arrived for them every second Monday were proof enough of that.

But even if Frau Leib didn't ask questions, she still liked to talk.

'Listen to the frogs in the pond!' said Frau Leib, her fat fingers firm around the knife handle as she chopped through thick bacon while Heidi peeled the potatoes for the soup. (Heidi had never had bacon before — Duffi didn't like people to eat meat. But they ate it now.) 'If the frogs croak like that at night it will rain in the morning.'

'Are there fish in the pond?' asked Heidi. She was allowed in the kitchen often now to help Frau Leib. Together they made the beds, and dusted too.

'Just the frogs,' said Frau Leib.

Frau Leib had five children: 'Liesel, oh, I had such a hard time having her,' said Frau Leib. But at that Frau Leib halted a while, as though she had remembered how young her listener was. And there were Franz and Josef and Helmuth and Erna.

She also had two grandsons who worked the farm, and another two who were only babies, too young to help at all.

'But oh, we need the help,' said Frau Leib, shaking her head so her chins wobbled but her metal curls stayed firm. 'All the fine strong men are in the army, and just old men and boys to help us now.'

If the farm had been bigger, she explained, the boys — her sons — might have been given a deferment from the army, so they could help the Führer by growing food for the soldiers of the Reich.

'Of course, they are proud to be fighting too,' said Frau Leib hurriedly, with a sideways look at Heidi. 'We all have to do what we can.'

Several times Heidi noticed Frau Leib slip a little flour or a twist of sugar into the pocket of her coat that was hung by the back door when she came to work. But Heidi did not speak of it. She and Fräulein Gelber had more than they needed, and she now knew from Frau Leib that most people were going hungry, even here in the country with the cows and goats and pigs.

Frau Leib took their scraps to feed to the hens, and the dishwater to feed to the pigs. 'It will just go to waste else,' said Frau Leib reasonably, as she slipped a piece of leftover sausage into the hens' bin that they could very well have had for lunch the next day.

'Could we keep hens?' Heidi asked Fräulein Gelber.

Fräulein Gelber shook her head. 'They are dirty things,' she said. 'Besides, Frau Leib will sell us all the eggs we need.'

It was funny with Frau Leib in the kitchen. No one had ever talked to Heidi so freely before. Sometimes Heidi thought that Frau Leib wasn't talking to her, but was just talking because she was uncomfortable when her mouth was still.

Did Frau Leib talk even when she was walking home by herself? she wondered. Did she talk to the starlings and the thrushes and the blackbirds perhaps ... But it was good to listen to Frau Leib's conversation. There was so much to learn that no one had ever mentioned to her before.

'... and the blacksmith keeps the cows shod — oh yes, the cows must have shoes just like the horses if they are to work — and the scythes whetted ... You have never seen the blacksmith work? But all the children hang around the forge after school! The banging and the clanging and the hot fire ... you must come down this afternoon then ... but perhaps not,' said Frau Leib, pushing the broom and remembering.

'It's the fat that makes a good pig,' explained Frau Leib one day, as she worked the pastry on the thick marble board. 'The fat not only gives flavour, you understand, it helps the meat keep well. A sausage

without fat is tasteless, but it also dries out, and sometimes goes bad. But not all food will put fat on a pig of course. Fat produces fat — that's what you have to remember. Corn is good, because corn is yellow like fat is yellow.

'And you want to know a secret?' asked Frau Leib, her red hands bashing the bread dough. 'You want to know why in all these years our cows have never lost a calf? *Never!*'

'Please,' said Heidi, though she knew by now there was no need to say anything to keep Frau Leib talking.

'The secret is beer!' said Frau Leib triumphantly, giving her dough an extra good push. 'You give the cow a good drink of beer as soon as it has calves, and it makes the milk flow and makes her mellow, you understand, so she looks after her calf better. A good bucket of beer, that's what you need ...'

'I have brought you a present,' Frau Leib said one day, as she took off her hat and gloves and coat and hung them on the peg by the door.

'What is it?' demanded Heidi.

Frau Leib smiled. 'It's in my coat pocket.'

Heidi peered into the pocket. There was something in the bottom; something small and warm.

'A rabbit!' she cried, lifting it out. The rabbit was soft and black and white and twitched its nose.

'It's a doe,' said Frau Leib, smiling. 'When she gets bigger you can breed it to our buck and then you'll have lots of rabbits, and I'll show you how to make rabbit pie.'

'Look at its whiskers!' cried Heidi delighted. 'Thank you, Frau Leib!'

'You're a good girl,' said Frau Leib, and Heidi knew it wasn't because she was polite, or helped make the beds, but because she had said nothing about the things in Frau Leib's pockets.

Heidi helped Frau Leib in the mornings, and often in the afternoons now as well. Fräulein Gelber had arranged all the schoolbooks in the third bedroom, but she no longer seemed as interested in lessons as she was before.

She didn't even make Heidi read pages from Duff's book. She read her letters from home over and over, and several times Heidi found her crying. But now she wouldn't explain why.

Fräulein Gelber still liked to walk, and they did walk once a day, but not along the lane: 'In case someone sees us and asks questions,' said Fräulein Gelber. They walked across the fields instead.

The fields had belonged to their house. Frau Leib's husband worked them now. They walked across the Leibs' fields too. There was a wood not far away and

once they saw a deer, grazing delicately by the edge of the trees, and once a wild pig, a 'Wildschwein'.

The wildschwein did not look at all like Frau Leib's pigs. It was black and hairy with big shoulders and a tiny back and even its snout was crooked. It stared at them with tiny eyes, and then it ran away.

Heidi asked Fräulein Gelber why the wild pig was so different from Frau Leib's pigs, but Fräulein Gelber couldn't say. 'It's just the way things are,' she said.

There were wild mushrooms in the fields in autumn and the leaves in the wood fluttered like yellow butterflies and stuck to Heidi's shoes. Frau Leib made mushroom omelette as a treat, because even for them, eggs were getting scarce.

Sometimes city women came out and tried to trade things, like a cushion or a good saucepan, for an egg. Or even jewellery for a ham.

Frau Leib told Heidi all about the city women, but she didn't say whether she traded with them or not. It was illegal to trade food. Everything was rationed; but Heidi suspected that she did, even if Herr Leib didn't know.

One day when she and Fräulein Gelber were out in the fields, a plane flew down so low she could see the pilot's face, or rather, his helmet, which mostly hid his

face. All she could really see were his mouth and chin, white below the brown helmet.

She almost wanted to wave, he was so close. If she'd yelled 'Hello' he might even have heard her above the clatter of the engines. But he was an enemy, and even if he had been a German pilot, Fräulein Gelber would have frowned.

chapter eight

Who is better?

The bus rolled and wandered through the puddles, then bumped up onto the bitumen. The splash of mud and water stopped.

'I'd like to see His Excellency the blinking Mayor drive this blinking road twice a day,' muttered Mrs Latter to no one in particular. She blew her nose with peculiar vehemence into the big white hanky. 'Made sure he got the bitumen right up to his place, no worries about that. But as for doing anything for us out here ...'

No one said anything. If you answered Mrs Latter you were in for an argument all the way to school.

Mark waited till Mrs Latter had subsided under her hat (it was orange and red today) then tapped Anna on the shoulder. 'Anna?'

Anna looked up from her book and turned round. 'Yeah, what?'

'You know how Hitler went on about the Jews? About some people being better than others?'

'Yes,' said Anna.

'Well, was there anything in it?'

Anna stared. 'Of course not!' she said.

'I don't mean about the Jews,' said Mark hurriedly. 'I mean everyone knows that's stupid. But what I mean is, are some people better than others ... you know what I mean.'

Little Tracey turned round. 'I'm better at spelling,' she boasted loudly. 'Miss Littlefield says I'm the best of all. I can beat anyone in the class. I bet I can beat ...'

'That's not what I meant,' interrupted Mark.

Anna frowned. 'You mean, is any group of people, a whole country or a race or a religion, better than other people?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

'I don't know,' admitted Anna. 'Like Irish jokes. Everyone carries on that the Irish are dumb but everyone knows they aren't really.'

'My great-grandpa was Irish,' said Mark.

'So was one of mine,' said Anna.

'My grandpa came from Yugoslavia,' said Little Tracey, bouncing up and down in her seat. 'He says that he ...'

Mark spoke over the top of her. 'Ben's dad says that Asians are all criminals. But that can't be right can it? I mean how do we know?'

'Ben's father's a racist little rooster with maggots for brains,' announced Mrs Latter, circling round a pothole with more swerve than necessary, so they all had to grab the edges of their seats. 'And you can tell him I said so with my love. No need to tell him anyway. I've told him often enough. Last time I saw him down at the pub I said ...'

'Why,' began Mark, then stopped. No need to get Mrs Latter any more worked up.

'Why? I'll tell you why! You just have to look at the statistics, but does anyone bother to do that? No, they just listen to what some twerp has to say on TV and take it like it's gospel. Never mind if it's true or not. People just don't THINK, that's the trouble. They don't look at the evidence. Never mind if anyone with half a brain in their heads ... get on the right side of the road, you flaming numbskull!!' Mrs Latter roared at Johnnie Trantor, bumbling past in his old ute.

'What do the statistics say, Mrs Latter?' asked Anna soothingly.

'Asians have a lower crime rate than the rest of the population, that's what they say,' said Mrs Latter triumphantly. 'And if you don't believe me you look it

up yourself. You look at the ten most wanted criminals in Australia! Not a dark skin among the lot. All white and all dumb.'

Mark hesitated. Most times you'd be crazy to actually ask Mrs Latter a question. But she wasn't going to shut up now, no matter what anyone said or didn't say and maybe, just maybe, she'd have an interesting answer.

'Mrs Latter,' he attempted to interrupt.

'... and as for that slimy, mean-mouthed bloke on TV, you know what I'd say to him if I ever caught him on my bus ...'

Yeah, right, thought Mark. As though you'd get someone important like him on a school bus. 'Mrs Latter, do you think there's any group of people who are better or worse than other people?'

'Sure,' said Mrs Latter, swinging cheerfully back onto the middle of the road.

'Really?' asked Mark in surprise. He'd been sure she'd say, 'No, everyone is as good as everyone else', and then go off into one of her yelling matches. 'Who, Mrs Latter?'

'Men,' said Mrs Latter with satisfaction. 'They're the worst group of people out there.'

'But men aren't a group or a race or ...'

'What are they then? Most crime is committed by

men, most car accidents are caused by men.' Mrs Latter counted off on her fingers, so the bus swung wildly again.

'Now look what you've done,' Anna muttered to Mark.

'Men start most of the wars, and fight in them too. Most of the people in prisons are men. You just have to look at the statistics!'

'You know what I think?' demanded Mrs Latter, then answered herself as no one spoke. 'I think men should pay higher taxes to pay for all the damage they do. Women are naturally gentler, more cooperative ... Move your rear, you great mug!' yelled Mrs Latter, as the bus slowed down behind old Mr Hannon's Holden.

Mrs Latter was still holding forth as the bus pulled in to pick up Big Tracey. Mark sighed, and opened his maths homework.

chapter nine

Questions

Mr McDonald was sitting at his table marking homework when Mark looked through the door.

'Mark, what's up?' he asked.

'Nothing ... I just wanted to ask you something.'

Mr McDonald looked a bit nervous, thought Mark. Maybe he'd asked him too many questions lately, the sort that Mum and Dad couldn't answer like, 'How fast could God ride a bicycle?' and 'How did life begin?' But he put his book to one side anyway.

'Sure. Fire away,' he said.

'I just wanted to know ...' began Mark slowly. 'I mean it's silly but I was thinking. Do kids have to be like their parents?'

Mr McDonald frowned. 'I'm not sure I get your meaning,' he said.

'Well, say someone's father did something really evil like Hitler, or Pol Pot,' he added hurriedly. 'Would their kids be evil too?'

Mr McDonald looked relieved, as though he'd expected the question to be more difficult.

'That's a good question, Mark. No, they probably wouldn't be evil too. I can't think of anyone really bad in history whose children were as bad as they were. In fact, sometimes the opposite is true. Bad people often have good kids, and good people have bad kids.'

'But we're like our parents, aren't we?'

'Yes and no,' said Mr McDonald. 'Kids often inherit the same sort of temperament as their parents, and maybe the same talents. Like music for instance, or painting. But usually they do something different with it. A painter's kid might become an architect, for example, if they inherited the same talent. Maybe that's the best way to put it — you inherit your talents from your parents, but what you do with them is your own choice. And mostly kids do things their parents never thought of.'

'So ... so Pol Pot's kids for example. They wouldn't go round killing people?'

'I don't know if Pol Pot had any kids,' said Mr McDonald.

'But if he did?'

Mr McDonald hesitated. 'Well, if they were in the Khmer Rouge — Pol Pot's army — I suppose they might do the same sort of things. But if they were brought up somewhere else, then no, they probably wouldn't do the same sort of things at all.' Mr McDonald looked at him sharply. 'Why do you ask Mark?'

'I was just wondering,' said Mark.

'There isn't any trouble at home is there?' asked Mr McDonald carefully.

Suddenly Mark realised what he meant.

'No! I mean, no, I'm not worried about Dad or anyone.' Mark nearly laughed. As though Dad could do anything so wrong or evil that he'd be worried about it.

He thought quickly. 'I saw something on Pol Pot on TV that's all, and I wondered if he had a son and what he'd be like.'

'Maybe he'd have decided to be a chef ... or a banker ... But he'd probably feel guilty and confused if he realised what his father had done,' said Mr McDonald.

'It wouldn't be his fault, would it? All the murders his dad did?'

'No,' said Mr McDonald slowly. 'It wouldn't be his fault at all. Not unless he felt the same way as his

dad did. Or maybe if he refused to face up to the evil things his dad had done ... that would be wrong. If we don't face up to things that were wrong in the past then we might do them again.'

'Mr McDonald ...' Mark had another question, but he could see that Mr McDonald was getting impatient.

'Yes, Mark?'

'The things Hitler did, or Pol Pot ... all that genocide stuff. I mean could they have ever thought they were right?'

Mr McDonald looked uncomfortable. 'I don't know,' he said at last. 'Sometimes people think they are doing the right thing even when it is bad. But with Hitler and Pol Pot ... I just don't know. Maybe they did think what they were doing was good.'

'But how can we *know* we're doing the right thing?' cried Mark.

Mr McDonald shrugged. 'I can't answer that either,' he said a bit helplessly. 'I'd have to think about it. How about you ask your parents or Father Steven next Sunday. Sorry if that doesn't really answer your question. I had better go and grab some lunch before the bell goes. No more questions then?' he asked hopefully.

'No more questions. Thanks,' added Mark.

He supposed Mr McDonald had at least tried to give him answers.

The thought pestered him all through afternoon school.

People *should* do what they thought was right. But what if what you thought was right, was wrong?

Doing what everyone else did was no help either. If there was one thing that all that Hitler stuff showed, it was that most of a whole country could be wrong.

Had everyone back then *really* thought about things? Had they looked at the evidence — the statistics and stuff like old Mrs Latter was always spouting on about — or did they just believe because they wanted to believe, because they wanted to ...

'Mark! Are you listening?' demanded Mr McDonald.

'Er ... yes,' said Mark.

'Then look like it,' ordered Mr McDonald. 'Now if you turn to page ...'

There had to be some answer, thought Mark, as he opened his work book.

Someone must have an answer somewhere.

chapter ten

Friday Afternoon

The bus seemed slower than ever that afternoon. Even Mrs Latter seemed subdued, her grey hair limp under her hat, as though the argument that morning had used up all her energy.

The bus trundled through town, dropping off a couple of kids on the outskirts, then took the turnoff down to Wallaby Creek.

Mark watched the grey sky and the wet paddocks beyond. Feehan's Swamp was like a mirror, dull silver reflecting bare willows and cold cows. Even the bitumen road looked a deeper grey.

He was sick of the rain. It wouldn't be so bad if it actually did something, thought Mark, like a cyclone or a tornado or something. But this rain just sat there, as if it was too lazy to move. It wasn't even proper rain any more. Just wet air, cold and bleak and boring.

'Hey, did you get out the question on page seventy-six last night?' demanded Bonzo beside him.

'Sort of,' said Mark.

'I asked Mum, but she wasn't any use at all. Didn't parents ever learn anything at school? They can't ever answer anything right.'

'Yeah,' said Mark.

Bonzo looked at him more closely.

'Hey, are you alright?'

'Sure.' Mark sat up. Too much thinking, that's what was wrong, he thought to himself.

'What are you doing this weekend?' asked Bonzo.

Mark blinked. He'd forgotten it was Friday. That meant they couldn't play The Game tomorrow morning. No more story till Monday.

Bonzo nudged him.

'Dunno,' said Mark. Maybe the three of them could meet on Saturday or something, he wondered. But of course everyone would think that was really odd. He and Anna hadn't spent any time together since they played together as little kids, and as for Little Tracey ...

'We could go for a bike ride,' said Bonzo. 'Dad could put the bikes into the back of the ute when he goes up to town and we could ride back to my place.'

Mark shrugged. 'Sure. If the rain stops, anyway.'

Bonzo gazed out the window. 'It's boring when it rains.'

'Bonzo?' asked Mark suddenly.

'Mmmm?' Bonzo was still staring out at the rain.

'What would you do if someone wanted to start a ... a sort of army around here?'

'You mean all us kids drilling with rifles and things to attack invaders? It'd be cool.'

'But ... but what if it wasn't invaders. I mean, say if it was a politician who started it all, like Hitler started the Brownshirts, and they wanted us to attack people they didn't like ...' Mark stopped. He didn't know how to explain.

'Like who? I still think it'd be cool,' said Bonzo. 'Maybe New Zealand would invade us or UFOs and we'd have to fight them and all dress up in uniforms and maybe ambush them like on that show on TV.'

'That wasn't what I meant,' began Mark.

Anna would understand, he thought, his eyes on Anna in the seat in front. Anna really thought about things. All he had to do was nudge her, and say, 'How about you and Little Tracey come down to my place tomorrow afternoon and you can finish the story.'

But it would be embarrassing. He knew he couldn't do it.

chapter eleven

Saturday, Sunday,
Monday Morning

The flood smelt like wet socks.

Even the kitchen was full of the smell and it was stronger than the smell of last night's pizza.

Mark shut the kitchen door — Dad must have left it open when he went out to check the pump was still out of reach of the flood — then sat down at the kitchen table. Behind him the radio sang out the tune that announced the news. Dad had listened to the weather report earlier and left the radio on:

'... the genocide still continues. Eyewitnesses now say that the death toll may number several thousands, with the numbers still rising as government troops ...'

Mark blinked. For a moment he had thought he was back in the 1930s, the radio talking about all the people that Hitler was killing.

But this was NOW. People were being killed NOW. He'd heard these reports before of course, but it had never seemed real ... he'd never actually *thought* about it before.

The radio announcer was talking about something different. Something about land rights and ...

'Well, who's ready for breakfast?' demanded Dad happily, tramping into the kitchen in his socks and turning the radio off automatically. 'I'm starved!'

Dad always cooked eggs and bacon on Saturday mornings. Saturday was the only day he cooked breakfast, and the only day they had eggs and bacon, too, with a sausage each and baked beans sometimes as well. Fried cholesterol, Mum called it, but she liked Saturday breakfasts too.

Dad dumped the plates down on the table and sat down.

'Anyone want anything up in town?' he asked, as he squirted chili sauce on his bacon. 'I have to go up and get some more diesel.'

Mum shook her head. 'I shopped last Thursday ... well, maybe fresh bread. And milk. And shampoo, we've nearly run out. I'll make a list.'

'Dad ...' asked Mark suddenly.

'Mmm,' said Dad resignedly, sprinkling pepper over his egg.

'Are people being exterminated today?'

Dad swallowed his food the wrong way. 'Are they *what!*' he choked.

'Being exterminated. You know — like Hitler and the Jews.'

Dad took a gulp of coffee. 'Of course not,' he said.

'But on the news it just said about people being killed in that place with the funny name.'

Dad shrugged. 'Oh. That stuff. Can't say I've been following it.'

Mark chewed for a minute. 'Dad ...' he asked.

'Now what?'

'How did great-great-Grandpa get our farm?'

'What? He bought it.' Dad reached for the mustard and squirted some on his sausage.

'He didn't steal it from the Aborigines?'

'No, of course not.' Dad gave him a sharp look. 'It wasn't like that in those days, anyway. No one thought of it as stealing.'

'Mark, your egg's getting cold,' said Mum.

Mark took a bite of egg. 'But what if he *did* take it from the Aboriginal people ... just suppose. It wouldn't be our fault, would it?'

'Who's been feeding you all that stuff?' demanded Dad, his face closed off in a way that Mark had never seen before.

'I was just listening to the news, and someone said —'

'The things they teach kids nowadays,' said Dad, attacking his sausage savagely. 'It'd make more sense if they taught everyone to mind their own business. Do-gooders poking their nose in where it doesn't concern them.'

'But Dad —'

'Mark, give it a rest would you.'

'But remember you told me that if we disagreed about anything we should talk about it. You said —'

'Mark, that's enough,' said his Mum hurriedly. 'Okay?'

Mark ate his egg in silence.

The rain stopped on Saturday night. The clouds that had stretched tight and grey across the sky shrank into mushrooms that puffed and waddled through the blue. The trees shone tiny diamonds across their leaves and the creek shrank slightly under its edge of foam.

Sunday night the rain began again.

At least we had Sunday free, thought Mark

gloomily, as he listened to the rain on the roof; the thud, thud, thud and the droop, droop, droop where it dripped from the eaves. Finally, he dozed.

He dreamt of the creek, and the flood smashing its way across the rocks. He dreamt that Hitler was across the creek, but this Hitler wore jeans and his haircut was modern in spite of the moustache under his nose that looked as if it was sticky-taped on.

Hitler was making a speech. And suddenly there were people all around on Mark's side of the creek, listening, cheering.

'Go away,' Mark yelled to them. 'It's a silly speech! Can't you hear it's silly.'

But his voice made no sound.

There was Ben on his motorbike with a swastika on his arm, and Bonzo in a uniform, and even Little Tracey was saluting Hitler too. Bonzo just wanted excitement and Ben didn't think about things at all and Little Tracey would do what her friends ... 'But he's wrong!' cried Mark. 'Can't you see he's wrong!'

But they were laughing and cheering and excited, and no one was listening to Mark. They were wading into the creek, into the flood. They'd be washed away, thought Mark, and anyway, they shouldn't be there at all. It wasn't their farm and Dad would be angry with all the strangers on it, and the radio was talking about

people being killed in that place in Africa, in Europe, in Indonesia, and Hitler was laughing, laughing, laughing ...

'You are all my children,' screamed Hitler. 'None of you really care. None of you question. You are all Hitler's children!'

'Go away,' cried Mark again. 'Can't you see I'm trying to sleep?'

And suddenly he must have woken, or half woken anyway, because he was in bed and the people were gone. He rolled over, and pulled the doona up to his head, and this time he slept deeply.

The dream had almost vanished at breakfast. Only the flavour of it lingered inside his head.

'Mum?'

'Mmm? Do you want muesli or porridge this morning?'

'Porridge,' said Mark. 'Mum, if Hitler came back now ...'

'You're not still on about Hitler are you?' asked Mum, measuring the rolled oats into the bowl. She slipped it into the microwave and pressed the button. 'You've got Hitler on the brain lately.'

Mark watched the bowl spin round and round inside the microwave. 'Well, not Hitler then. But someone really bad, like Hitler.'

'Oh Mark, not more questions. It's too early!' protested Mum.

'But Mum, what if *everyone* thought the really bad person was right! Like all the German people thought Hitler was right?'

Mum took the bowl from the microwave and stirred it, then put it back again. 'I don't think *all* the German people thought Hitler was right,' she said. 'Don't forget it was a totalitarian country.'

'What's that mean?'

'It means Hitler controlled the radio and the newspapers, so no one was allowed to say anything he didn't agree with. And if you tried to speak out you were sent to a concentration camp.'

'Did people protest?' asked Mark.

'No idea,' said Mum. 'I suppose so. Here you are.'

She passed him the milk and brown sugar.

'Mum, if Hitler had been in power would you have protested?'

'Of course,' said Mum absently.

'Even if it meant going to prison.'

'What? No, I don't suppose so. Mark, I'm just not interested in stuff like that. Alright? Just eat your breakfast.'

Mark sprinkled the sugar over his porridge, making sure it spread evenly over the whole bowl,

with just a few hard lumps dissolving in the middle. 'What I mean is,' he said, swallowing the first spoonful and blowing on the next. 'If everyone — or almost everyone — thinks something is right, but you *know* it's wrong, what do you do then?'

Mum sighed. 'For the love of mud ... Eat your porridge. Okay?'

Mark shrugged and took another spoonful of porridge. There was no point keeping on if Mum had had enough.

He wondered what it would be like to have a mum who *loved* answering questions. A mum who really liked thinking about things.

'That's a really good question, Mark,' the imaginary Mum would say. 'My first reaction is to say, "Mind your own business." But that's the wrong answer, isn't it?'

'Is it?' asked Mark in his mind.

The imaginary mum would nod. 'It's what I do all the time,' she'd say slowly. 'Turn off the TV, avoid arguments with people like Mrs Latter who want to discuss everything and sign petitions and things. But ...' and she'd shake her head. 'That's what people in Germany did, didn't they? They didn't agree with Hitler. Or not with everything he did. But they

shut their eyes and let things happen.' The imaginary mum would nod her head and look at him seriously. 'You've made me think a bit,' she'd say.

And then she'd start listening to the news all the time and going to demonstrations and signing petitions like Mrs Latter, which would be really embarrassing ... and anyway, Dad said most of the time Mrs Latter just got people's backs up.

And maybe Mum would have to go to prison if someone like Hitler did get into power, and there was no way he wanted her to go to prison, or spend all her time involved in stuff like Mrs Latter.

But maybe ... maybe ...

'What's up?' asked Mum, the real Mum. 'Porridge too hot?'

'It's okay,' said Mark.

Mum sighed. 'Look, ask me questions when I'm not so rushed. Okay?'

'Okay,' said Mark.

chapter twelve

The News

There was still no sign of Ben at the bus stop on Monday.

'He must have a *really* bad cold,' said Anna.

'His mum told my mum she didn't want him going to school in the rain in case it got worse,' said Little Tracey. 'Cause he gets asthma sometimes when he gets a cold. Come on, Anna!'

'Come on what?' asked Anna.

'Go on with the story about Heidi,' said Little Tracey.

For a moment Mark thought she was going to refuse — would say she'd forgotten how it went over the weekend or something like that.

But instead, Anna began, and the story flowed as if there had been no break, as though it was as clear as a movie in her mind, and all she was doing was

describing what she saw and heard on the screen inside her mind.

'Frau Leib brought her news one morning,' said Anna, her voice clear and low. 'Along with the fresh goat's milk in the bright green china jug with the flowers on it.'

(Two of Frau Leib's nannies were in milk now. One was called Lottie and the other Hildegard, after two old friends of Frau Leib. Heidi wasn't at all certain if she would want a goat named after her but she never said so to Frau Leib, and sure enough, the next baby goat was called Heidi.)

Frau Leib waited till Fräulein Gelber had gone upstairs to write the letters she seemed to be so often writing now.

Frau Leib seemed to know that Fräulein Gelber wouldn't approve of gossip, particularly the gossip she had today.

'They sent him away!' she whispered excitedly, as she stoked the fire in the old cracked stove. 'Just last night and Liesel came running over to tell me this morning.'

'Your daughter? What did she say? Sent who away?' asked Heidi.

'Herr Henssel!' Her voice was happily horrified. 'He has the farm over past the mill. No one would have guessed! None of us guessed!'

'Guessed what?' wondered Heidi, but Frau Leib went on as though she hadn't heard.

'His sister married a draper in town.' She lowered her voice and brought her wide, shiny face close to Heidi's. 'A *Jewish* draper. The sister and her husband disappeared a long time ago, and everyone thought, Oh, they have been taken to the camps. Herr Henssel never spoke of them. But Herr Henssel has been sheltering his sister and her husband all the time! He has been hiding them so they wouldn't take them to the work camps! Someone must have seen, someone must have noticed, and they must have notified the authorities, because today they took him away — took them *all* away. Oh, it is awful!', but Frau Leib's small eyes had the joyous gleam of a good gossip nonetheless.

'If the Jews just go to the camps to work, why did Herr Henssel have to hide them? Are the camps so terrible?' asked Heidi.

Frau Leib shrugged. She didn't care what the camps were like. The things that were important happened in her village, or to people she knew.

'Are there any other Jews near here?' asked Heidi.

'Not in our village, not any more. But before the war, in town, there were the Solomons, of course, in the drapers' shop — not that I ever went there, you understand. My husband would have been angry if I

went to a Jewish shop. And there was Herr, oh, what was his name? The teacher at the school, and the doctor, not the new one, the old one. One of his children went to school with Gerda, who married my ... but you know that, I showed you the photo of the wedding, and the Führer sent a copy of his book with his signature just inside the cover. Not that I have ever read it. I have sometimes taken it and looked inside. I have looked at it often. Such a wise clever book. But now, of course, all the Jews have been sent to the camps ...'

'Heidi!' Fräulein Gelber stood at the door. 'What are you doing?'

'Helping Frau Leib,' said Heidi.

Fräulein Gelber fixed them both with one of her hardest looks. It was evident she had heard at least the last part of the conversation.

'It is time for your lessons,' she announced, although the only lessons they had had recently were the passages Heidi read at night by the light of the candles on the table and the fire in the stove, while Fräulein Gelber sewed or looked at the flames as though she were far away and listening to a voice that was not Heidi's at all.

'Yes, Fräulein Gelber,' said Heidi.

Brown water splashed across the road as Mrs Latter pulled the bus up to the curb.

chapter thirteen

Heidi's Plan

'I've guessed what happens now,' said Mark.

They were at the bus shelter. ('You want to go early *again*?' Mum had demanded in disbelief.)

The rain still melted from the clouds. Ben was still in bed with his cold.

'What?' asked Little Tracey eagerly.

'I bet Heidi organised some escape plan for the Jews from the concentration camp. Now she's found out what's happening, I mean. Or she spies on Hitler and passes on the information.'

Anna looked at him steadily. 'Would you spy on your father?' she asked him quietly.

'No,' said Mark. 'But my dad isn't Hitler.'

Anna shook her head. 'How could she spy on him? It had been months since she'd seen him. And even then just for a few minutes. Who would she pass